

DEATH, YOU IS MY WOMAN NOW

A NOVEL



ALBA PRATALIA

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By Alba Pratalia

The beach lay quiet beneath a slate-colored sky, its sand damp with the breath of the sea, where waves rolled in with the tired rhythm of something ancient, not quite asleep but long past caring. A chessboard sat precariously on a salt-bleached log, its carved pieces half-sunk in the grain from years of waiting. Wind stirred, but gently, as if unwilling to interrupt.

Seated on one side was a knight—Antonius Block, once of Crusades and certainty, now all rust and ghosts. His armor bore the fatigue of a thousand miles and none of them meaningful. He sat with the stillness of a man who had looked for God and found a mirror. His hand hovered above the board as if the right move could explain suffering, or at least justify the bad weather.

Opposite him sat Death.

Still. Formal. Cloaked in an indifference that had outlived empires. His skeletal hand rested lightly on a bishop, patient, polite, inevitable. No menace—just administration.

Around them, the sea whispered secrets to the stones. The sky darkened by imperceptible degrees. And still they played.

Something, somewhere, was holding its breath.

A seagull, watching from a crooked post, gave a single contemptuous squawk and shat dramatically on the board.

The game did not pause. But the prelude was over.

And then, like a cymbal in a requiem, it came: A *scappelotto*—sharp, open-palmed, unapologetic—landed on the back of Death’s gleaming skull. The sound echoed off the water like someone slapping a hollow melon full of metaphysics.

Death lurched forward, one vertebra popping audibly, his bishop falling sideways in mild protest. He turned, slow and affronted, the way only the personification of oblivion can when treated like a layabout cousin at a family barbecue.

"Oh *faccia di merda*, ti vuoi muovere?"

A figure had appeared, short, hunched, apron smeared with tomato sauce and eternity.

"One needs it, and *Sua Maestà della Pigrizia* sits here playing with its little knight friend. *Ehi, paisà*, people are waiting to die out there! Will you raise your lazy, greming ass?"

Death blinked—or would have, if blinking were part of his design. The knight merely looked up, mildly interested, as if hoping someone had finally come to deliver the answer or at least coffee.

The newcomer crossed his arms, thick forearms tattooed with forgotten names, and gestured broadly toward the horizon where, indeed, a long queue of disgruntled souls had formed—some coughing, others checking sundials, one waving a number like they were waiting for cured ham at a butcher's counter.

The tide, politely, did not laugh. But the stars twinkled with the restraint of those who have *seen things*.

Death, suddenly planting his bony heels firmly in the sand, stopped short and raised his hooded head in defiant passion.

"I never wanted to be a Grim Reaper!" he proclaimed dramatically, voice cracking with pent-up existential angst. "I wanted to be... **A LUMBERJACK!**"

In a flourish of theatrical rebellion, Death cast off his dark cloak, revealing beneath it a pristine lumberjack outfit: denim jeans snugly hugging his skeletal hips, sturdy leather boots, a red-and-black checked flannel shirt, and bright red suspenders. With his arms thrown wide, he began to sing heartily:

I'm a lumberjack and I'm okay
I reap all night and I sleep all day
I cut down souls, I eat my lunch
I haunt the lavatory

On Wednesdays I go shopping
For tombstones, tea, and me!"

But before he could launch into the next verse, the air screeched with the sound of a record needle violently scratching vinyl.

"Oh no you don't!" snapped the man in the sauce-stained apron, seizing Death again by the ear-like projection of his skull. "We've had enough Monty Python for eternity, thank you very much. Come on!"

Dragging Death behind him—boots scraping reluctantly through sand—he marched away briskly, muttering to himself. "Next he'll want to be a bloody lion tamer."

Back in the man's neighborhood, people finally began dying again—politely, predictably, and above all, punctually.

James—everybody called him Jim, even the voices in his head—was happy again. Genuinely happy, not the fake kind he wore at birthdays or while waving at neighbors from the mailbox. No, this was real, gut-warming, soul-tingling joy. Death was back at work.

Finally.

For months, Jim had felt like a loyal customer waiting for a store to reopen, pressing his nose against the glass of mortality. And now, finally, the sign flipped:
OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

He practically skipped home. *Now*, he could start planning again. The possibilities made his heart flutter like a high school crush.

Window? Classic. Elegant. A vertical farewell.
Bridge? Poetic. A little cliché, but picturesque.
Gun? Direct. Clean. Well, not clean, but decisive. He imagined the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson nodding in approval while Hemingway polished a

shotgun and Kurt Cobain tuned a Nirvana song for atmosphere.

Then came the romantic ones. **Train tracks.** Oh, yes. Full Anna Karenina. Drama. Steam. Closure. That one even came with literary prestige.

It was like a tasting menu of oblivion. Each method a dish. Each farewell a flavor. He tapped a notepad, scribbling ideas like vacation plans.

Death was back.
The menu was open.
And Jim had never felt more alive.

So, daydreaming as he was—and floating gently on the veterinary-dose Xanax he washed down with two inches of bottom-shelf bourbon—Jim saw himself, not in his stained bathrobe, but in a tailored charcoal suit. Crisp. Elegant. Fedora tipped just right. He stood beneath a lamppost that flickered with noir intentions, smoke curling up from a cigarette that didn't exist.

The street was wet, of course. It always rained in moments like this. A saxophone moaned somewhere out of frame. The world was in black and white. Except for the bourbon. That was Technicolor.

And softly, inside his head, the record began. A velvet voice, crooning through static:

In the wee small hours of the morning
While the whole wide world is fast asleep
You lie awake and think about the death
And never, ever think of counting sheep

Jim took a slow, melancholy drag of his ghost-cigarette, staring into nothing. Not metaphorically. Literally—there was nothing.

When you're still alive and learned your lesson
You'd be dead if only Death would call
In the wee small hours of the morning
That's the time you want Death most of all

Cue spotlight. Cue slow dissolve. Cue Jim sighing like a Sinatra lyric.

Death owed him a dance. And he was already in his best suit.

Finished with his song, Jim stubbed out his imaginary cigarette on an imaginary ashtray, took one last swig of imaginary bourbon, and returned to his methodical contemplation:

- **Gun:** You have to venture into the ghetto, find the right shady fellow, fake some tough-guy bargaining—too much trouble.
- **Train:** Walking all the way to the station was unthinkable, too much effort. And public transport? The poor-mover? The peasant chariot? No thanks.
- **Window:** Convenient, economical, immediately available. Perfect.

Decision made, Jim slid open his window with the gravity of a Roman senator announcing his retirement and jumped.

He sailed downward, weightless and relieved. The wind whistled a soothing lullaby in his ears:

FIIIIIIIIIIII

...and then—

flooof

He landed softly. Too softly. Confusingly, annoyingly, ridiculously softly.

Beneath him lay a truck stacked high with mattresses, its side emblazoned cheerfully with a smiling moon and a sleeping cartoon bear.

Jim sat up slowly, bouncing gently on the fluffy padding, and groaned into the indifferent sky:

"What the Buster Keaton?"

Before Jim could gather his wits or dignity, the truck lurched, shifting into gear with an aggressive growl that belonged more to a monster truck rally than a mattress delivery. Off it went, merrily rattling down the road, taking Jim—still sprawled in existential confusion—along for the ride.

Panic elbowed existentialism out of the way. Jim banged frantically on the cabin roof:

"Hey! Heeeeeey!" he shouted, voice cracking with bourbon and indignation. "There's people up here—and they want down! Or at least one person. One deeply unhappy and heavily medicated person!"

Inside, the driver glanced up briefly, shrugged indifferently, and turned up the radio.

Sinatra crooned again, faint but clear:
"That's the time you miss her most of all..."

"Oh, shut up, Frank," Jim muttered bitterly, resigning himself to the absurdity of being

chauffeured off toward unknown adventures atop a cargo of orthopedic luxury.

A sudden whoop of sirens sliced the mattress-filled tranquility. The truck jolted to a halt, making Jim roll slightly, sinking deeper into memory foam bewilderment. A police officer stepped out of his patrol car, hand raised in authoritative irritation.

"Do you know why I stopped you?" the officer barked at the truck driver. "You can't have people riding on top of your cargo—even if it's mattresses."

The driver shrugged with practiced apathy as the officer scribbled on his notepad, already committed to bureaucratic vengeance.

Seeing his chance, Jim began climbing down, gingerly lowering himself one mattress-layer at a time, only to be stopped by an authoritative wave from the cop.

"No no no, sir. Climb back up, please," the officer commanded wearily. "You're the violation. I'm already halfway through writing the fine. If you get down, the violation disappears, I'd have to cancel the fine... far too much paperwork for this hour of the day."

Jim sighed, reversed direction, and climbed reluctantly back up to his perch, settling in miserably among the fluffy bedding. He stared down, blinking helplessly.

"You comfy up there?" the officer asked, without looking up. "Good. Just stay put."

Jim looked up to the heavens, mouthing silently:

Really?

The truck rumbled back to life, driver shifting gears with the cheerful indifference of a man accustomed to life's infinite absurdities. As they rolled along, the driver's hand reached lazily from the window, passing

up a quarter-pint bottle of bourbon and a generous tube of Xanax.

"Jubil your heart out," came the disembodied voice from the cab, as if this were a service provided regularly on mattress transports.

Precisely three minutes and fourteen seconds later—a p's worth of existential reflection—Jim lay stretched atop the soft cargo, cradling bourbon and Xanax, the sky sliding gently by above him. The world softened around the edges, and suddenly Duke Ellington's piano was dancing dreamily through his mind, swinging smoothly, cheerfully.

Jim began crooning in a mellow, medicated voice:

*You just took the "A"-truck
To go to sugar hill way up on mattress
If you'd missed the "A"-truck
You wouldn't have missed the quickest
way to the ground*

He closed his eyes, tapped his foot to Ellington's imaginary rhythm, and surrendered gracefully to whatever ludicrous twist fate had waiting next.

Jim spotted the low overpass in the distance like a lighthouse of doom, a concrete kiss from the gods of finality.

“Oh, here it comes,” he whispered, eyes glistening with irrational hope.

He stood tall—well, wobbly—arms stretched wide like a tragic Christ of HomeGoods, bracing to meet his end with the blunt force of state infrastructure. One final *thwack*, and he’d be free from rent, emails, and promotional emails pretending not to be promotional.

But fate, having already poured bourbon on his script and doodled cartoon penises in the margins, had other plans.

Standing on a stack of mattresses on a moving truck was, it turns out, not OSHA approved. Jim's feet betrayed him. He wobbled. Wavered. Windmilled.

"WELL, GOOD ENOUGH!" he shouted as he tumbled, flailing into the air. "I'LL SPLAT ON THE ASPHALT! BYE BYE LIFE!"

Except...

Flooof

He landed in a carriage full of hay. Real hay. With a real horse. Driven by a man in a flat cap humming "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain."

Jim spit out straw and looked around in disbelief.

"You must be kidding me," he groaned. "This is pure *Looney Tunes*."

The horse neighed in agreement. The driver offered him an apple.

And the overpass sailed gently by.

A *playful flourish of brass*—bright and cheeky, like a trumpet winking at the audience—bursts forth from nowhere, as if the universe itself had a rimshot department. Then, the *cartoonish staccato rhythm* kicks in, all bounce and pratfall, like a tuxedoed penguin tripping with impeccable comic timing.

Out of the hay, in a puff of animated dust, *Porky Pig* pops up mid-bale, eyes wide and stammer primed:

“Th-th-th-th—that’s all folks!”

The universe pauses.
The orchestra *zings* up in a gleeful, ascending whirl of strings and winds, like fate giving one last tug on the comedy curtain.

And Jim, now reclined in the hay like it was always meant to end this way, reaches into his jacket, pulls out a carrot, takes a bite, chews slowly, turns to the audience with the weight of all absurd existence behind him, and mutters:

"Eh… What's up, Doc?"

SMASH	CUT	TO	BLACK.
Executive	Producer:	<i>Death</i>	
Mattress	Coordinator:	<i>The</i>	<i>Universe</i>
Spiritual Advisor:	<i>Chuck Jones</i>		

Jim, wedged in the hay like a forgotten biblical parable, was now cursing everything Warner Bros had produced since *1918: *My Four Years in Germany*, including but not limited to Porky, Bugs, Wile E. Coyote, and the concept of anvils.

"*You ruined death,*" he muttered, waving a stray bit of straw at the heavens. "*You weaponized slapstick against despair. Shame on you and your corporate cousins at Looney-f*ing-Tunes.*"

But just then, like a jazz angel descending through a cloud of secondhand smoke and emotional sedation, the bourbon and Xanax hit critical mass.

Inside Jim's head, a snare drum tapped out a crisp *ba-da-da-da-da* in 5/4, tight as a bank vault and cooler than mercy. Then, a piano entered, laying down that sly, lounging lead. And finally—oh yes, finally—the saxophone, lazy and perfect, sauntered in with that sacred call:

Tubdurududu tuturudu tudurudu...

Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* flooded his mind like warm jazz napalm.

Jim relaxed in five quarters.
Jim decontracted.
Jim's internal organs settled into syncopation.
And somewhere, deep in the over-medicated jazz lounge of his soul, Jim forgave:

Warner Bros.
His mother.
That Catholic priest with wandering hands.
And the dry cleaner who ruined his favorite salmon-pink shirt and blamed "soap chemistry."

The horse clopped gently on.

Everything, for exactly five beats at a time, was okay.

Jim fell asleep mid-brubeck, mouth slightly open, carrot still in hand like Bugs Bunny's overdosed cousin. He drifted into a dream where saxophones led therapy groups and mattresses applauded when you cried.

And then—*thud*.

He rolled off the haystack. Slid off the carriage. Fell, like Icarus if Icarus had taken too much Xanax and landed in a compost heap instead of the Aegean.

He woke with a snort and a jolt, face pressed against damp earth, the lingering taste of hay and regrets on his tongue. He blinked at the sky, which offered him nothing but a big indifferent blue.

He sat up.

Looked around.

No bridges to jump from.

No trees to hang from.

No guns.

Just… fields. Endless. Flat. Uninterrupted.

The kind of place you die in only after decades of farming and two failed marriages.

He squinted at the horizon. A lone cow chewed slowly and stared at him, chewing judgment into cud.

Jim sighed.

“Great. Death put me on *hold*.”

From the shimmer of heat and absurdity on the edge of the field, a figure emerged: a classic silhouette, straight out of a time when cartoons had blackface and no one was arrested for it. A hobo—complete with patched trousers, worn boots, and a stick slung over his shoulder, handkerchief knotted at the end like it carried the soul of the Great Depression.

He strolled through the field with a gentle bounce in his step, smiling as if sorrow were a jazz note you just bent the right way.

And then, with no preamble whatsoever, he sang:

"Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got no car, got no mule
I got no misery..."

His voice rolled like molasses over a gospel radio. Jim sat up, wiped a smudge of manure off his cheek, and blinked.

"Oh, we Porgy and Bess'ing now," he muttered, looking around to see if Gershwin himself was hiding in a corn stalk with a conductor's baton.

The hobo kept going:

"De folks wid plenty o' plenty
Got a lock on de door

'Fraid somebody's a-goin' to rob 'em
While dey's out a-makin' more—what for?"

Jim, now thoroughly awake and theatrically defeated, reached into his jacket. No bourbon. No carrot. Just pocket lint and crushed dreams.

He stood, brushed hay from his pants, and muttered, "Well. If we're doing opera now, I better go find my aria."

Just as the last note of hobo gospel faded into the endless hum of insect apathy, the corn rustled—*violently*, like something wasn't supposed to be alive in there.

Out popped a teenage boy, twitchy-eyed, hoodie half-zipped, and looking disturbingly like Jesse Pinkman after a sugar crash and three Red Bulls.

"*Dude*," he whispered with reverent urgency, holding up a Ziploc bag that glowed faintly like

radioactive sugar. “Wanna some blue meth? Highest purity. Ninety-nine point freaking nine.”

Jim squinted, leaned in slightly, then rocked back on his heels.

“Is it legal?”

The kid snorted. “Dude. No.”

“Does it do you any good?”

“*Double* no.”

Jim gave it a full beat, like a man weighing the price of salmon at the deli.

“I’ll have two pounds, then, please.”

The deal was made right there, in God’s own pasture, as a gospel hobo hummed somewhere in the distance and the sky politely looked away.

Pinkerman—not Jesse, legally, but spiritually adjacent—grinned wide, teeth like a picket fence half-demolished by regret.

“For such a *premium* purchase,” he said, producing a velvet pouch with all the gravity of a magician revealing his final trick, “I’ll throw in the glass pipe *and* the lighter. No charge.”

Jim nodded solemnly. “Customer service still lives.”

2π minutes later—exactly 6.28 minutes, because when life gets this absurd, only irrational constants apply—Jim was laid out flat in the field, limbs splayed like a chalk outline done by Pollock.

His eyes were orbiting somewhere near Saturn.

His soul was dancing the samba with Neptune’s moons.

He was cruising the solar system, baby. Not metaphorically. His ego had dissolved somewhere between Mercury and the Oort Cloud, and his

conscience was playing strip poker with the rings of Jupiter.

In his mind, Miles Davis was playing a duet with the Horsehead Nebula, and Carl Sagan was nodding in approval while lighting a cosmic joint.

Jim exhaled deeply, grass tickling his back.

“This... this might actually be it,” he whispered. Then a squirrel ran across his chest, farted, and ruined the moment.

Out among the spinning planets of Jim’s chemically-liberated mind, Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* swelled from the vacuum like it had season tickets to the Andromeda Opera House.

The stars hummed harmony.

Comets waltzed.

Saturn adjusted its rings for acoustics.

There, drifting arm in arm across the firmament, Jim floated in a tuxedo made of stardust beside Death, now dressed inexplicably in a white dinner jacket and tap shoes. Together, they sang—soulfully, stupidly, transcendentally:

Jim:

*Death, You is my woman now,
You is, you is!
An' you mus' laugh an' sing an' dance
For two instead of one.
Want no wrinkle on yo' brow,
Nohow,
Because de sorrow of de past is all done done—
Oh, Death, my Death!*

Death:

*Jim, I's yo' ol' Death now,
I is, I is!
An' I ain't never goin' nowhere
'Less you shares de fun.*

They twirled together in zero gravity, passing Mars with a knowing wink, doing soft shoe on asteroids. Jupiter played stand-up bass. Uranus forgot its cue, as usual.

The galaxies spun faster, clapping on the twos and fours.

And for once—briefly, beautifully—death was not the end.

It was a number.
A duet.
A cosmic Broadway finale.

Then Jim woke up.

Not gently. Not poetically.
No Duke Ellington. No comets. No dinner jackets
made of stars.

Just pain.
And the thick, metallic taste of dread.

His joints ached like he'd been trampled by regret.
His chest buzzed with panic like someone had
replaced his heart with an anxious vibrator. And his
soul? His soul felt like it had slept in wet socks.

It took him **3 or 4π** minutes—roughly 10 to 12 tragic rotations of his internal shame clock—to remember who he was, where he was, and that the glowing planetary musical was not, in fact, being reviewed by *The New Yorker*.

He sat up with the grace of a man 30% mattress stuffing, wiped a mixture of saliva and hay off his chin, and looked down.

Still there.
The bag of blue meth.
Barely touched. Sparkling like a suburban Christmas nightmare. A twisted promise in Ziploc form.

Jim stared at it.

Raised it slowly.

Squinted, like a philosopher confronting the abyss—or a man trying to read an ingredients list without his glasses.

And muttered:

“Well, fuck me sideways and call me Heisenberg. Not even *you*?”

The meth said nothing. As usual.
The field swayed in silence.
A bird shat majestically in the distance.

Jim sighed.
“Guess it’s gonna be one of *those* lifetimes.”

Jim began walking—the ultimate insult. The thing he hated more than optimism, small talk, and dentists who ask about your weekend while scraping your molars.

Each step was a personal betrayal. Each footfall, a tiny war crime against his dignity.

But fate, that greasy little playwright, had other plans. Over the hill came a tractor, slow and steady, towing a manure spreader that burped gently with every bounce. The air was a bouquet of cow rectum and existential realism.

Jim squinted, shrugged.

“Eh… metaphor’s good enough.”

He clambered aboard and sat on the bumper, feet dangling above the dust, behind a machine designed to fling shit across great distances. He lit an imaginary cigarette and rode in silence, the wind rustling his hair like a bored undertaker flipping through old photos.

Somewhere down the road, the tractor passed a U-shaped strip mall, the kind built by the gods of poor decision-making. At one end: **Liquor Store**. At the other: **Gun Shop**.

“Subtle,” Jim muttered, hopping off like Clint Eastwood’s tired cousin. He stood in the middle, mumbling to himself.

“First liquor? First gun?”

A moment of arithmetic.

“Buy gun *sober*, then drink, then *use* gun,” he concluded, nodding like he’d just solved Fermat’s Last Theorem.

He adjusted his jacket, cleared his throat, and began walking toward fate with a credit card, dry mouth, and a philosophical itch behind the eyes.

Jim stepped inside the gun shop, a bell chiming merrily like a dinner call for doom.

Immediately, the scene turned distinctly Pythonesque.

JIM: I want to buy a gun.

OWNER: (lustily) Certainly, sir. What would you

like?

JIM: Well, eh, how about a little Colt?

OWNER: I'm afraid we're fresh out of Colt, sir.

JIM: Never mind. How are you on Remington?

OWNER: I'm afraid we never have that at the end of
the week, sir. We get it fresh on Monday.

JIM: Tish tish. No matter. Smith & Wesson, perhaps?

OWNER: Ah! It's beeeneen on order, sir, for two weeks.

Was expecting it this morning.

JIM: 'T's not my lucky day, is it? Beretta?

OWNER: Sorry, sir.

JIM: Glock?

OWNER: Normally, yes sir. But today, the van broke
down.

JIM: Ah. Walther?

OWNER: Sorry.

JIM: Taurus?

OWNER: No.

Jim sighed and squared his shoulders, ready to dive
fully into the absurd.

JIM: Ruger?

OWNER: Fresh out, sir.

JIM: Winchester?

OWNER: Just sold the last one, sir.

JIM: Browning?

OWNER: Not today, I'm afraid.

JIM: Mossberg?

OWNER: No, sir.

JIM: SIG Sauer?

OWNER: Sorry.

JIM: Heckler & Koch?

OWNER: Next week, sir.

JIM: Springfield Armory?

OWNER: No luck, sir.

JIM: FN Herstal?

OWNER: Not at the moment, sir.

JIM: CZ?

OWNER: Sadly, no.

Jim's eyes narrowed in weary desperation.

JIM: Well, then, do you in fact have *any* firearms at all?

OWNER: No, sir. Not a single one. Finest gun-free gun shop in town.

Jim closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Somewhere, John Cleese chuckled softly.

BLING-BLING.

The bell above the gun shop door gave one final, pathetic jingle as Jim stormed out muttering an unbroken stream of Second Amendment Foundation-themed obscenities.

“‘Well regulated militia’ my ass... couldn’t regulate a water pistol convention... constitutional my left testicle...”

He crossed the parking lot, dust swirling like Western irony, and pushed open the liquor store door.

Heaven.

Stocked floor to roof, wall to wall—an altar of glass and sin. Bottles glowed like stained glass windows. The air smelled of oak barrels, broken promises, and divine oblivion.

Jim froze at the threshold, mouth slightly agape, eyes wide.

A ray of sunlight broke through a cloud and shone directly onto a pyramid of absinthe bottles.

The “**Good Morning**” tune from *Singin’ in the Rain* began to play inside his head—or the store speakers. Unclear. Reality had long since given up.

Jim grabbed a cart with the reverence of a Vatican intern lifting the Holy Grail and burst into song:

Jim (tossing in a bottle of Jim Beam):

Good *Morning*

Good *Morning*

Jim Beam will soon smile through!

He spun around the aisle, jazz hands out, two mini-bottles of Bailey's as tap shoes.

Jim (leaping slightly too dramatically near the schnapps):

Good Morning
Good Morning
We'll drink the whole day through!
Good Morning—
Good Mooooorning—
TO BOOOOOZE!

The cashier gave a slow, respectful nod.
“Take your time, champ.”

At checkout, the cashier—a man with the eyes of someone who's seen three divorces and the ghost of Dean Martin—scanned the mountain of glass and self-medication with professional detachment.

"If you buy two of those," he said, pointing lazily at the high-proof bourbon, "there's a complementary bottle of Xanax."

Jim froze mid-sway, like a prophet hearing the divine.

He turned, slowly, then sprinted with the speed of divine calling.

He came back with *six*.

"Thank you, my good man," he declared with courtly dignity, placing them down like offerings.

The cashier raised an eyebrow, then handed over a plastic bag heavy with pharmaceutical mercy. "You can keep the cart."

Jim stood for a second, hand on the handle, like a king reclaiming his chariot.

He pushed it gently, reverently, across the parking lot to the equally pathetic U-shaped \$30 motor hotel next door. The sort of place where dreams go to rust and soap comes in thimbles.

Room

107.

He didn't even speak to the clerk. Just held up the Xanax like credentials, and the guy slid him the key.

Inside the room—half-bed, half regrets—he pushed the cart over the cheap industrial carpet. The mattress sagged like a sigh. The A/C rattled with death.

Jim closed the door.

Faced the altar of booze.

The pills, shimmering like holy relics.

He clicked his palate.

Twice.

That's the stuff.

Jim stood before his apocalyptic cocktail, arms open like Moses parting the minibar. “Oh, this time,” he said with the tranquil confidence of a man who’d already tipped 20%, “I’m going so easily…”

And indeed, the first few sips were smooth.
Velvet bourbon.
Cloud-soft Xanax.
Like sliding into warm water with bricks tied to your soul.

But alas—biology is a bastard.

Just as oblivion neared, just as the stars began to swirl in welcoming spirals and Duke Ellington’s ghost cleared its throat—**sleep**. Deep, drooling, snoring sleep. The coward’s coma. No salvation, no farewell, no celestial encore. Just REM and regret.

When he awoke groggy and insulted by survival, he took a breath and tried again: all at once this time.

Bottles in one hand, pills in the other. A toast to finality.

But the body, that treacherous meat vessel, revolted. His stomach seized, clenched, and delivered a violent "*vaffanculo*" of its own. He projectile-purged salvation all over the floral bedspread.

Panting, pale, leaning over a trash can that now smelled like a distillery met a psych ward, Jim gave up.

He surrendered.

And, like countless saints before him, accepted his fate: drinking not as a farewell—but as a *lifestyle*.

Slumped on the bed, wrapped in a crusty towel, he poured himself another glass, raised it in mock benediction, and began a slurred, glorious litany of Italian *bestemmie*:

“Porcodio… porcamadonna… diocane… dioboia…
madonna maiala… diomerda… porca madonna de
dio cane…”

The A/C groaned in sympathy.
Somewhere, a pope choked on his espresso.
And Jim?
Jim kept drinking.
Like a man *damned with purpose.*

In the bleary piss-light of morning, Jim awoke in Room 107 surrounded by the wreckage of his spiritual retreat: empty bottles, tear-stained pillows, a tube of Xanax rolling under the bed like a single bean of shame.

He rose with a grunt, took one look in the mirror, and muttered,
“Well, it didn’t kill me. So I guess it made me...
crusty.”

Then—full of bourbon-fueled theatricality and zero remaining dignity—he reached for the hotel’s complimentary shoe polish and painted his face black. Badly. Unevenly. Comically. Like a minstrel show directed by Werner Herzog.

Bottle in hand, uncapped and swaying, he stumbled out into the morning sun, staggering down the sidewalk like a demented parody of protest, bellowing with full Gershwin bravado:

“Oh Lawd, I’m on my way
I’m on my way to a cop brutality
I’ll ride that long, long road
If You are there to choke my neck—”

He hiccuped mid-verse, splashing bourbon on his shirt.

“Oh Lawd, I’m on my way
I’m on my way to a cop brutality

Oh Lawd, it's a lotta gunshots
But You'll be there to handcuff my hand—"

He sang with arms wide, bottle held aloft like a deranged liberty torch, stumbling past yoga studios and boutique dog bakeries.

But instead of cop cars or choking knees, he was met with smartphones. TikTokers. Freelance indignation. The Woke Squad, armed with almond lattes and rage tweets.

"WHAT THE ACTUAL F—" "That's offensive!" "Blackface? Are you mentally unwell or just historically illiterate?"

"Yes," Jim whispered hoarsely.

Retreating like a Confederate reenactor caught in Whole Foods, he ducked into a nearby diner.

He wiped his face clean with a napkin that crumbled from the shoe polish. Sat at the counter. Poured bourbon directly into the coffee pot.

“Bring me eggs,” he growled at the waitress, “and don’t you dare ask how I want them. Just *scramble* my soul.”

And he sipped his spiked coffee, calm now. Rejected by God. Rejected by Death. Rejected by Cancel Culture.

Jim was back in his natural state:
Hungover. Offensive. And caffeinated.

One scoop of rubbery diner eggs.
One Xanax, dry-swallowed like communion.
One generous gulp of what was technically bourbon
with a teaspoon of coffee for legal camouflage.

A forkful of bacon that crackled like the American dream dying in grease.

Repeat.

Jim's eyes glazed with reverence. His limbs loosened. His spine uncoiled. He was no longer in a diner. He was in *art*. He was in Hopper's *Nighthawks*. He was the fourth silhouette, hunched at the bar, eternal and tragic, glowing softly in fluorescent melancholy.

The waitress was a red-haired goddess in a starched apron. The line cook was a mythic titan sweating behind a grill of fire and regret. The man in the corner was definitely a detective with secrets.

And in Jim's head, Miles Davis began to play.

Flamenco **Sketches.**

The trumpet melted time. The piano whispered to the floor tiles. The bass murmured something obscene to the salt shaker.

Overwhelmed, possessed by jazz gods, Jim reached for a napkin, wrapped it around a plastic comb from his inside pocket, and *became* an instrument.

“Prrrrrt. Prrfffft. Prrrrrrrf.”

His cheeks puffed, his eyes closed. He swayed gently, conducting his inner orchestra of Xanax and eggs.

To him, it was transcendence.

To the rest of the diner, it was a grown man making fart noises into a comb.

Repeatedly.

With intensity.

And sincerity.

One old man muttered, “Jesus.”

Another nodded. “That’s Hopper alright.”

A baby cried.

The waitress just kept pouring coffee.

She’d seen worse. Probably *been* worse.

Jim lifted the kazoo-comb for a final note.

PRRRRRRRRRRT.

The hash browns applauded in grease.

Jim, emboldened by bourbon and fortified by fried protein, spotted them from the diner window—a swirling sea of keffiyehs, cardboard signs, megaphones, and pure, unfiltered outrage. On the other side: a Roman phalanx of anti-riot cops with batons, plastic visors, and the facial expressions of men whose childhood dreams had been suffocated by a laminated badge.

Jim's eyes lit up.

"Ohhh, police brutality, here I come!"

He threw down some cash, saluted his waitress with his kazoo-comb, and stumbled out into destiny.

Approaching the nearest group of sign-wavers, he tried to blend in with the confidence of a CIA agent

who learned Arabic from *Aladdin*. He squinted at a placard, then addressed the crowd:

JIM:

Are you the Palestinian People's Front?

REG:

F*** off!

JIM:

What?

REG:

Palestinian People's Front. We're the *People's Front of Palestine*.

FRANCIS:

Wankers.

JIM:

Can I… join your group?

REG:

No. Piss off.

JIM:

Look, I hate Israel as much as anybody.

P.F.P.:

Shhhh. Shhh. Shhh. Shhhh. Stumm.

JUDITH:

Are you sure?

JIM:

Oh, dead sure. I hate Israel already.

REG:

Listen. If you wanted to join the P.F.P., you'd have to
really hate Israel.

JIM:

I do!

REG:

Oh yeah? *How much?*

JIM:

A lot!

REG:

Right. You're in.

Jim grinned drunkenly, arms out to embrace his new tribe. But Reg wasn't done.

REG:

Now listen. The only people we hate more than Israel... are the *F**ing** Palestinian People's Front.

P.F.P.:

Yeah!

JUDITH:

Splitters.

P.F.P.:

Splitters!

FRANCIS:

And the Palestinian Popular People's Front.

P.F.P.:

Oh, them too. Splitters!

LORETTA:

And the People's Front of Palestine!

P.F.P.:

Splitters! All of 'em!

REG:

What?

LORETTA:

The People's Front of Palestine. Splitters.

REG:

We *are* the People's Front of Palestine!

LORETTA:

Oh. I thought we were the Popular Front.

REG:

People's Front! C-huh.

FRANCIS:

Whatever happened to the Popular Front, Reg?

REG:

He's *over* *there.*
(points)

P.F.P.:

SPLITTER!

Jim blinked. Looked around.

And for the first time all day, quietly whispered:

"...maybe I should've just stayed in the diner."

Jim, freshly armed with ideological cosplay—a borrowed keffiyeh wrapped like he'd watched *one* documentary, and a Che Guevara t-shirt two sizes too tight over his bourbon gut—marched straight to the front of the protest like Moses with a Xanax habit.

The crowd parted slightly, unsure if this was performance art, mental collapse, or a heavily satirical TED Talk.

He squared up to the riot line—cops in black, unmoving, faces blank as parking tickets.

Jim puffed his chest, raised his arms, and let the madness sing:

"FREE PALESTINE!" (*murmurs of confused agreement*)

"BURN ISRAEL!" (*gasps, smartphones raised*)

"BLACK LIVES MATTER!" (*hesitant clapping*)

"ATTICA! ATTICA!" (*someone yells "Wrong protest!"*)

"YOU'RE OUT OF ORDER! AND YOU'RE OUT
OF ORDER!"

(*cop blinks slowly*)

"DEFUND THE POLICE!"

He started pushing a cop's shield with the enthusiasm of a drunk uncle helping you parallel park.

The officers tensed.

One cop turned to another:

"Is this—performance art or a suicide attempt?"

The second replied:

"Either way, body cam's on."

Jim, in full meltdown glory, dropped to his knees, fists in the air, and screamed:

"¡Viva la revolución!"

A tear gas canister bounced harmlessly beside him.

Jim picked it up, sniffed it.

"Smells like... America."

Then blacked out from sheer patriotic overexertion.

Jim woke up to the gentle beep-beep of monitored shame and the faint sting of rubbing alcohol in his nostrils. He blinked. Blurred ceiling lights. Sterile walls. Faint jazz somewhere, or maybe it was tinnitus in B-flat.

He turned his head slightly and realized he was inside an ambulance—parked, engine idling, back doors open like the gates of reluctant salvation.

Outside, *all hell had broken loose.*

Tear gas cloaked the streets like malignant fog.
Batons rose and fell like meat tenderizers in a fascist
cooking show.

Rubber bullets zipped through the air—straight to
the eyes, as if the cops had studied *anatomy of
suffering* as a minor.

People screamed, ran, fell, bled.

Placards were snapped in half. Knees, too.

A full-fledged traditional protest repression—classic,
like grandma used to make.

Meanwhile, inside the ambulance, a paramedic with
soothing eyebrows smiled at Jim and held out a
spoon.

"Would you like some more fruit jelly, Mr. Jim? Just testing to see if you can swallow solids."

Jim, dazed and blinking like a hungover newborn gazelle, looked outside, saw a man get kicked in the kidney by three officers, and then looked back at the trembling spoon of grape jelly.

He opened his mouth.

"S'a little tart."

"Good," the paramedic said, writing something on a clipboard. "You're responsive."

A nearby explosion.

The ambulance rattled.

Jim sighed.

"Yeah. *That's* what gets a response."

Jim turned his head slightly, wincing from the chaos outside. His mind, a blur of bourbon, Xanax, and semi-conscious despair, locked onto the paramedic

like a broken compass seeking any direction that could end with an *exit sign*.

JIM:

“You wouldn’t happen to have some drug I can overdose on, would you?”

The paramedic paused, spoon halfway to his mouth, his eyes narrowing as though Jim had just asked for a detailed guide on how to stick a fork in an electric socket.

The paramedic blinked, slowly lowering the spoon.

PARAMEDIC:

“...What?”

JIM:

"Yeah, figured."

The paramedic’s frown deepened, like a storm cloud trying to negotiate with a toddler holding a live grenade.

JIM:

"Inject air in my veins? You got that?"

The paramedic's frown went to a higher power. Not just disapproval now, but the kind of parental frown reserved for when you walk in on your kid trying to microwave their pet hamster.

JIM:

“No, eh?”

He sighed, resigned to the fact that no one was offering the sweet, swift oblivion he desired. Then, as if to reset the scene with a tragicomic flourish, he grabbed the fruit jelly and shoved a spoonful into his mouth.

He chewed, a little too dramatically, swallowed, and mumbled:

“Ah, nothing says ‘death wish’ like synthetic fruit preserve, huh?”

The paramedic, still frowning, returned to his clipboard with a distinct lack of sympathy.

JIM:

“Didn’t think so.”

Jim, with a fruit jelly buzz and the moral clarity of a stunned possum, scrawled something on a clipboard while exiting the ambulance—possibly a waiver, possibly a declaration of insanity, possibly a pizza receipt. No one corrected him.

Outside, the protest had dissolved into aftermath.

The barricades were gone.

The slogans were silenced.

Blood was being hosed off the pavement by weary firefighters with blank eyes and high-pressure denial.

The air smelled like pepper spray and betrayal.

Jim, wrapped in a scratchy gray blanket and existential fatigue, wobbled down the street. He

didn't know where he was going, and frankly, didn't care. He vaguely hoped fate had prepared an open manhole for him—something poetic and municipal.

There wasn't.

Instead, he tripped, his shoe catching on nothing but dramatic timing, and banged full-force against the swinging doors of a dive bar—**SCHLUMPY'S** painted in flaking red letters overhead.

The doors flapped once.
Twice.

And Jim, guided by the angels of slapstick despair, re-tripped and fell *perfectly* onto a barstool.

His breath left his body in a wheeze.
It sounded like the sigh of a soul exhaling its last shred of pretense.

It also sounded, quite clearly, like:

"Bourbon."

The bartender, who looked like a retired bouncer with arthritis and an MA in disappointment, poured a glass without a word.

Jim took it with reverence.

Life, again, refused to kill him.

So he drank.

JIM:

“Do you have any Xanax?”

The bartender didn’t blink.

Didn’t speak.

Just lifted one calloused thumb and pointed behind himself with the elegance of a man who had long since ceased asking *why*.

Behind him, two mirrored shelves.

One glittering with bottles of booze—rum, whiskey, gin, liquid sorrow aged twelve years minimum.

The other stacked with plastic pharmacy bottles,

labels handwritten in Sharpie, caps color-coded like a twisted medical Tetris.

He slid a laminated **menu** across the counter. It read:

THE SCHLUMPY'S HOUSE PAIRINGS

Suggested Flights of Forgetting

- Jack Daniel's + Prozac = Southern Gothic
- Laphroaig + Clonazepam = Peaty Disassociation
- Rumple Minze + Lithium = Arctic Stability
- Bourbon + Xanax = The Kentucky Vanish

“Ask about our Weekend OD Sampler!”

Jim read it like a sacred text.
Pointed reverently.

“*The Kentucky Vanish*, please.”

The bartender nodded solemnly, mixed the concoction in a stained shaker shaped like a pelvis, and served it in a rocks glass rimmed with salt and mild despair.

$3\frac{3}{4}\pi$ minutes later—approximately 11.78 minutes, cosmically speaking—Jim was surfing the Milky Way on the back of an interstellar tortoise named Chuck, high-fiving meteorites and composing jazz with Carl Sagan’s ghost using rings of Saturn as a vibraphone.

His body remained in the bar.

But Jim?

Jim was *gone*.

The beach stretched out under a sky the color of old iron, the light thin and reluctant. The sea moved in slow breaths, heaving against the shore without urgency or malice, as if time had grown tired of counting.

The wind tugged gently at the edges of things—at the coarse sand, the brittle grass clinging to the dunes, the hem of a long-abandoned cloak.

In the middle of this quiet desolation sat a single figure: the knight.

His armor, dulled by salt and silence, no longer shone—only absorbed the grey. He sat hunched over a weathered chessboard, the pieces frozen mid-game, waiting for a hand that would never move again.

There was no opponent.

No Death.

Only the board, the sea, and the vast, aching pause
between moves.

A seagull wheeled above him, cried once, and disappeared into the mist.
The knight did not look up.
He was still playing.
Or maybe just remembering the game.

From the far end of the beach—where the mist clung thicker and the sea whispered a little louder—*Jim* appeared.

He walked slowly, as if the sand were deeper than it looked, or as if time were reluctant to let him arrive. His shoes were wrong for the beach. His coat was wrinkled and damp. His expression was the exact midpoint between hangover and metaphysical inquiry.

The knight did not look up.
He hadn't looked up in a long time.
Jim reached him.
Paused.

Looked at the board.

Frowned with the intense squint of a man trying to remember if he's played this dream before.

He sat down in the empty seat.

By the blacks.

Of course.

He studied the board.

Tapped a bishop twice, then made a move.

Soft *clack* on the wood.

The knight stared at the board.

Moved a pawn.

For the first time, he spoke. His voice was rusted iron wrapped in velvet.

“Checkmate in two moves.”

Jim stared at the board.

Stared at the knight.

Looked back again.

Then leaned back, exhaled through his nose, and muttered with complete sincerity:

“Well fuck me sideways and call me Kaspárov.”

A jazz-soaked, bourbon-drenched slap in the face of mortality.

Jim wants to die.

The universe wants a show.

In a world where suicide meets slapstick, and death is too busy singing show tunes to do his job, one man's spiral into oblivion becomes a cosmic farce of epic, operatic, and cartoonish proportions. From failed overdoses to accidental mattress surfing, from blackface cancelations to Porgy-and-Bess-in-space, Jim is every tired soul who ever screamed into the void and got Bugs Bunny in response.

Dark. Hilarious. Desperate. Musical.

This is what happens when death takes a sabbatical—and life won't take the hint.

The Washington Post

"Deeply troubling. Morally bankrupt. Irresponsible. We couldn't put it down."